THE DECORATIONS AT THE TRAVELLERS' CLUB.

The following article appeared in the *Athenæum* of August 12. It will be found interesting as a description, and not altogether uninstructive as a piece of criticism:—

Extensive decorations, costing, it is said, some thousands of pounds, have recently been completed at this very happy adaptation of the Bufalini Palace. It is a satisfactory sign for the progress of Art to find a growing attention paid to architectural decorations, and, in so far as those lately executed at the Travellers' Club are likely to promote that desirable result, we are disposed to welcome them; but, in proportion to their probable influence, it is the more necessary to protest against that absence of all principles, which is manifest throughout—on floors, on walls, on ceilings, in passages, and in rooms. Tasteless and chilling as may be the universal white paint of Queen Anne's days—of which the Library at Blenheim affords a cool specimen—monotonous and depressing as are the drab and slate colours patronized by George the Fourth, which abound in Windsor Castle, and are, unhappily, conspicuous in Buckingham House (the pictures in the Long Gallery are hung against a drab-coloured wall)—it may be a question whether they are not preferable—exciting, as they do, no interest whatever—to bright colouring so misemployed that the eye cannot turn without detecting some false principle of taste.

The greatest offences in the decorations of the Travellers' Club arises from the employment of affectations and unrealities, which abound everywhere—sham granite walls, sham marbled columns and dados, sham bronze doors, sham bas-reliefs. As soon as you have passed the hall of entrance into the corridor, the fictions begin, and you traverse a passage of universal granites—pink, grey, green, &c. Besides being an affectation itself, this is the affectation of an unfit thing. Suppose the thing for an instant to be all real, would a *granite* passage be right in such a place? We are not entering an Egyptian temple, or the basement of a castle, but the light, cheerful passage of a sort of democratic modern palace, free from all fear of outward violence, and with a portal no more capable of resisting attack than polished mahogany and plate glass. Granite is surely not a material to be used here. But if you *will* use the hardest of stones for such a purpose, then ought not the forms in which you employ it to be somewhat analogous to the material itself? Here you have mock granite adapting itself to Italian mouldings—so light and elegant that you would select the softest oolite out of which to chisel them. The *ceiling*, too, is painted to affect granite. Do not all analogies drawn from Nature, as well as all good architectural precedents, tell us that the upper part of a building should be in all respects of material, form, and colour, lighter than the lower part? Let us forget this affectation of a thing out of place, and look at this passage simply for its colouring, which indeed begets the first general impression. Banish from recollection that the colouring is grained, and look at it as a surface of pink and grey—which is its aspect to most eyes. It may be a right principle to keep the passages and halls duly subordinate to the rooms, in respect of their decorative characteristics, but surely a passage that faces the north needs to be a little warmer and more cheerful in colouring than one which looks south. Yet there, in a due north aspect, we have shades of cool colours. The materials employed in the building of this hall, and its ornamental parts are chiefly wood and plaster, made to be coloured. Would not correct taste, then, simply colour them, producing the best effects out of the unlimited range of colours?

The wainscot staircase of the club remains substantially as it was before these recent decorations. Being chiefly of oak, its very reality protected it from change. The ceiling here has been richly painted in various bright colours, displayed in arabesque forms and panels, generally resembling those we also find in the drawing-room—for which very reason we think that these decorations cannot be altogether consistent—certainly they do not accord with the oak stairs and banisters. The walls here, as in the upper corridor, have been divided into panels by arabesque borders and lines. The effect is light and tasteful; but the carpet, which is a mass of unbroken crimson, is much to full-toned and positive to accord well with the delicate pale hues of the walls. The figures in the arabesque painting do not rise beyond second-rate decorative art, and the human figures which are sometimes introduced, are by no means well drawn or well proportioned. The highest academical excellence in drawing ought not perhaps to be demanded under such circumstances, but in this case, as it was thought necessary to send out of England for a decorative painter, we might fairly have anticipated something better than what we could have produced ourselves. In the present case, the work—both in design and execution—is certainly not beyond the mark of many of the London decorative painters. If our school of design has produced any fruits at all, it must by this time have educated a score of pupils quite up to the standard of these decorations.

Through a mock bronze door—of which a few words presently—we enter the drawing-rooms. What is the first general impression, without examining the details? The tone of the colouring is neither warm nor cold—though parts are of both characters, and there is no lack of many varieties of colour. The aspect of the room is a north one, and being such, the prevailing arrangement of colour should be warm. Modify it as you please to suit the particular character of the apartment—but do not forget that the room receives hardly a ray of direct sunshine throughout the year. In these drawing-rooms, the greater part of the surface of the walls is of a pale, cool-looking colour, something between a lemon and cream colour, arranged in panels, which are bordered by strong and rather dark contrasts. The lower part of the walls, the dado, and its mouldings, are coloured imitations of marbles, in which a blueish green predominates. Then the doors and window-shutters are coloured dark green, to imitate bronze—a violent contrast to the walls—and made the more positive by the deep crimsoned draperies of the curtains. The ceiling is richly coloured and gilt, whilst the walls are comparatively plain. The character of both ought surely to be more consonant,—or, if there were any difference, ought not the more attractive features to be on the walls, where they are most easily seen? Look from the ceiling to the carpet, and in the latter there is the same absence of concordance and propriety. It has no leading key-note of colour, so to speak, but is a sort of helter-skelter of many colours. These rooms cannot be said to have any general effect, or any one strong point to which all others are subordinate. There is nothing positive—nothing consistent—one part is warm, another cold. Richness in the ceilings, poverty on the walls;—deep-toned colours brought into violent contrasts with others of a very low tone. As for harmony and due subordination of parts one with another, they cannot be met with. The whole gives an impression as if it had been the work of a committee, where there had been a compromise to suit every one's taste, and each member had undertaken the independent arrangement of different parts—one superintending the floor, another the ceiling, a third the walls, a fourth the doors and shutters, a fifth the draperies, and so on. Having looked at the rooms thus generally, we proceed to glance at some of the details, which in their want of principle deserve severer criticism.

The ornaments are inconsistent with each other. Some are early Grecian, some Pompeian, some of the age of Louis Quatorze! as in the cornices of the window-curtains. There is no objection perhaps to a combination of different styles,—but it can only be realized successfully by a principle which, depriving each of its distinctive and independent character, succeeds in making all integral and harmonious parts of a novel creation. In architectural forms Palladio and Wren succeeded in accomplishing this, when they took those of ancient Rome and adapted them to the buildings of modern Europe. But the decorations at the Travellers' Club are very wide of the application of such a principle. Each different part—said cornices especially—looks like an independent impertinence, and to have been brought together by chance or caprice. It has been noticed that the doors and window-shutters are painted in imitation of bronze, of a dark blueish bottle-green hue. The same question suggests itself here as below in the granite corridor. What want could there be even for real bronze under such circumstances? The doors are subjected to no violences; not even exposed to corrosion in the open air. At best they are unsightly mockeries. On the panels of the doors are painted imitations of bas-relief metal-work. Imitations are tolerable in proportion to their successful approximation to realities. When it was decided so to ornament these panels, the use of real metal, iron, if bronze was too costly, would not have been an impossibility: a few shillings' worth of Mr. Bielfield's *papier maché* ornaments would at least have given an actually raised surface, and insured natural shadows whenever the door was opened. Now under fixed painted shadows, every time the door is opened a positive untruth is told in the face of the light. What can be said of the drawing-room carpet?—a thing in which the cost of pattern is hardly a consideration: certainly not to such a Club as this. It is just the carpet you would chance to find adorning the drawing-room of a flourishing cheesemonger in Aldgate or the Minories: flowers of every hue displayed in shaded golden scrolls. It belongs to no recognized style, ancient or modern; even that lowest of styles, the Louis Quatorze, would not own it. Is it not a mistake to attempt any imitations which cannot succeed? If we want the representations of flowers, let them be executed by means which insure something like a correct representation. Employ colours and brushes in the production of pictures of them if you will, but surely not worsted threads. The Greeks took the beautiful forms of nature and used them not as affectations to recal feebly the remembrance of the originals, but adapted them in new methods to new purposes,—which suggested new views of their intrinsic beauty. Even the artists of the middle ages exercised a better taste than ourselves. A bunch of flowers or group of animals worked in worsted, with its angular shapes affecting to imitate the flowing lines of nature's original, with its crude colouring and hard-marked blotches meant for brilliant hues and soft graduated shadows, merely reminds you how signally it is unlike what it has copied. How different is the effect produced by the pattern of the Grecian honeysuckle or the acanthus leaf on the Corinthian capital! We look on both as works intrinsically beautiful in themselves, as new creations and not as imitations. The Arabs have taught us how we may have a beautiful arrangement of colours almost independent of pattern. But we do not now intend to write an essay on carpets; and we can only despatch that of the Travellers' drawing-room by saying that it has both pattern and abundance of colours—but combined on such false principles that the meanest of Grecian ornaments or Arab combinations of colours rise very far above it.

We have thought it worth while to enter somewhat at length into this matter, because the members of the Travellers' Club belong to a class who will probably exercise some influence in those decorations of our national buildings which seem to be likely to be realised at no distant day. Should the parties who are responsible for the taste of the decorations in this Club have any voice in directing those of the Palace of Westminster, we hope our remarks may induce them to reflect that there are principles in such matters which cannot be neglected. If it be true that some thousands of pounds have been spent on these works, we do not scruple to say that a more satisfactory result might have been produced at a much less cost, had a more correct knowledge of the principles of decoration been applied.

SMALL STREET HOUSES.

TO THE EDITOR.

Sir,—My object in the following remarks is to call the attention of young architects and architectural draughtsmen to the subject of small street houses, with the hope that some improvements may be suggested, if I can raise a discussion on the subject. I am aware that it is usual for young architects to employ their leisure hours in designing temples, palaces, &c., which are never likely to be executed; therefore the time spent in arranging the plans, &c. is lost to themselves and the public. Now, I think commencing at the bottom of the ladder is the best place, and if we could only get the poorer class to wish for and have more comfortable and better dwellings, the next class immediately above them would catch the infection, and so on upwards.

The building societies being now established, many persons, such as clerks, workmen, and others, are about to build or purchase, with their assistance, in the environs of London, and as most will build for their own occupations, they will not object to spend thirty or forty pounds more than usual to obtain a comfortable and complete house, in which, perhaps, they will end their days. Such being the case, I will take the ordinary six roomed house; these are designed generally with two-rooms on a floor, and, in consequence of the Building Act limiting the ground to be covered to 550 feet, they are, with the exception of the front kitchen on the basement and the one pair front room, mere boxes. Now our object would be to see whether this plan can be improved upon; if not, take a little more ground, and if a much better plan can be obtained, now is the time to point it out while the Building Act is under consideration. Where a person has no family, perhaps he would be glad to let a portion; as three rooms would be sufficient for a man and his wife, he could well do so, but many are deterred from it, the two families being too much mixed together. I would suggest here that a plan might be so arranged, that three rooms be divided off, with a separate entrance, so that this objection might be got rid of, and would thus more readily allow the purchaser to pay off the amount of its cost. There are many little things in the interior arrangements of the cupboards and fittings in this class of houses that might be much improved. Means should be taken to prevent damp rising up the walls, and every room should be so ventilated, that a constant draft of air be kept up without the necessity of opening windows and doors to admit dust. All these and other additional comforts may be obtained at a very trifling extra expense, if well considered in, and form part of the original plan.

B.

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